Jean-Philippe Deranty

Injustice, Violence and Social Struggle. The Critical Potential of Axel Honneth’s Theory of Recognition

ABSTRACT

Honneth’s fundamental claim that the normativity of social orders can be found nowhere but in the very experience of those who suffer injustice leads, I argue, to a radical theory and critique of society, with the potential to provide an innovative theory of social movements and a valid alternative to political liberalism.

KEYWORDS: Honneth, Marx, Recognition, Critique, Social Struggle, Critical Theory, Violence

This paper aims to explore the critical content of Axel Honneth’s ‘ethics of recognition’, that is to say, the original potential for social and political critique that it entails. These important dimensions of Honneth’s work are often ignored. The specific critical core of Honneth’s model derives from his decided action-theoretic and normative stances. Combined, they produce the axioms that underpin the model: that social reproduction is embedded in normative principles which articulate the necessary conditions for individual self-realisation, and that social agents can somehow appeal, if only negatively, to these principles.
Part I provides a brief reconstruction of Honneth’s paradigm. I follow the logic that led Honneth to first accept the shift proposed by Habermas towards a communicative paradigm, then critique its linguistic reduction, and in its stead offer an anthropologically inspired, more substantial, model of socialisation that famously delineates the three spheres of recognition. My main concern in this part is to highlight how the shift from older types of Critical Theory, to communication, and finally to recognition is driven by the concern already mentioned: to conduct social theory on the very level of the immanent normativity of social action and interaction. This concern leads to the fundamental notion of the moral dimension of social reproduction and, as a negative consequence, the moral dimension of social struggles.

Part II then explores the implications of this position for social and political critique. I show how the action-theoretic, normative approach enables Honneth to make the experience of injustice the driving epistemic guideline of theory itself. No other contemporary social theory gives as much theoretical relevance to the experience of social domination. In fact, I argue that Honneth quite self-consciously places his proposal within a sub-current of Critical Theory, which, against more illustrious systemic styles of analysis, has characterised itself as the theoretical spokesperson for the ‘tradition of the oppressed’ (Benjamin). Against all expectations, Honneth can thus be portrayed as an heir of the Marx of the historical writings, the early Lukács, but also of Walter Benjamin or Franz Fanon. The critical edge in Honneth’s model becomes all the sharper if, in line with these writers, the consequence is drawn from the normative logic of recognition struggles that violence, the irreducible practical dimension of struggle, is to some extent morally justified.

Part III identifies some of the ways in which this critical edge was subsequently blunted. Although his model seems to lead naturally to a theory of social movements, and to substantial critiques of modern institutions, foremost of late capitalism, Honneth has left this part of his theory underdeveloped. Even more puzzling has been his tendency, in later texts, to recast the theory of recognition within the framework of political liberalism. In its inception, the theory of recognition provided a powerful innovative way to do without this framework. Equally, the acritical theory of modernity that underpins Honneth’s model is mentioned.
These final remarks, however, could only arise out of the very strength of the model. Despite being critical, they confirm and extend the powerful critical potential contained in Axel Honneth’s social philosophy.

I. Honneth’s Theory of Recognition

Honneth’s position is the result of a critical reception of Habermas.1 The most fundamental assumption borrowed from Habermas is that the progress in rationality has seen the replacement of a model based on the subject-object axis with an intersubjective, communicative one. Honneth’s work is a defence and illustration of the intersubjective tradition applied to social and moral philosophy. He has systematically devoted studies to the most important philosophical proponents of the intersubjectivity paradigm.2 Conversely, much of his critical work in social philosophy consists in highlighting the mistakes that arise when the intersubjective dimension is neglected.

The adoption of the paradigm shift towards communicative action leads to a Meadian, symbolic-interactionist account of subject-formation, as in Habermas: The subject owes its constitution to its relationship with other subjects; autonomy can only be realised in intersubjective dependency.3 A subjective centre of action, speech and self-reflection emerges as the retroactive product of processes of internalisation of external constraints and perspectives, accessed through symbolic means, and which constrain a rebellious source of spontaneity. This means that autonomy is fundamentally ‘decentred’.4 Equally, the social bond is best explained neither individualistically, nor holistically or systemically, but as reciprocal interaction, as communication.

Honneth identifies and makes his the early Habermasian idea that social reproduction is not best explained through instrumental action, or in terms of social labour as in Marx, but through the logic of communication.5 What holds society together, what enables the fragile articulation of competing yet interconnected subjective interests and expectations, is not functional integration through praxis, or the different subsystems that have arisen in modernity, but an understanding that is reached between agents about the shared assumptions that always must inform action-coordination. This understanding is made transcendentally possible by underlying normative constraints.
The point where Honneth departs from Habermas and that signals the move towards the recognition paradigm is that, for Honneth, the underlying normativity making social understanding possible is not best explained in pragmatic-linguistic terms. On the conceptual level, universal pragmatics leave out of consideration other equally important dimensions of normativity that constrain social action just as much as linguistic-pragmatic rules: social agents agree on action-guiding norms not just if these norms respect their status as equal partners in communication, but also if their affective, physical well-being and their cultural and social identities are not compromised by them. The linguistic turn belies the refoundation of social theory in a materialistic philosophical anthropology that takes into consideration the, partly pre- or extradiscursive, subject-constitutive dimensions of bodily and social experience. On the critical level, the linguistic turn leads to precisely the kind of functional analysis of social domination and resistance that was supposed to have been circumvented by the focus on communication. This is because the logic of communicative rationalisation produces a reified distinction between material and social reproduction. This in turn creates the fictions of a power-free realm of communicative action and of a norm-free realm of systemic regulation which make an action-theoretic analysis of social struggle, or more specifically an analysis of the contemporary forms of alienated labour, impossible.

By accepting the shift to communication, but rejecting its linguistic interpretation, the paradigm of recognition defines an action-theoretic perspective on social interaction and subjectivity: the philosophical-anthropological dimensions of individualisation through socialisation gives substance to the intersubjective hypothesis, but also, and just as importantly, to the normative dimensions of identity, social interaction and social evolution. In this model, the subject depends on relations of recognition for its formation; the self is a form of self-relating informed by the interaction with others. Three basic structures of self-relationship can be identified as fundamental conditions of subjective identity: an intimate self-relationship which grants the self the physical and affective self-assurance necessary to face the natural and social worlds; a self-relationship in which the subject sees itself as equally worth of respect, as a morally responsible subject; finally, a more substantive self-relationship which grants the subject the self-confidence that is necessary to claim its place in the social community as a valid contributor.
These formal structures also provide the key to the normative framework of the social. Social evolution has consisted in the gradual demarcation of these different spheres of identity, both in terms of real separate identity features and in terms of a differentiation of types of rights. Social action is constrained by the normative demands implicitly expressed in these features: when one of these fundamental features is compromised by cultural or institutional arrangements, particular individual and social pathologies emerge; individual and group discontent arise as a consequence and can potentially lead to practical attempts to redress these particular injustices.

The full paradigm is precisely one of a ‘struggle for recognition’, because of the logic of recognition. Recognition enables agents (individuals and groups) to both assert their identity and discover new features of their identity; these new features, however, since unrecognised, necessitate a new struggle for recognition, and so on. The most defining aspect of Honneth’s model is its constant, decisive rejection of all ‘functionalist’ or ‘systemic’ models of explanation in social theory. By that, Honneth understands any model that explains social integration in terms of the structural imperatives and constraints of social systems (markets, administration, legal system). Against them, Honneth wants to defend an exclusively ‘action-theoretic’ perspective, one that refers social explanation back to the perspective of the agents’ actions, that explains social structures as constituted through intersubjective interactions, not as the product of supra-individual necessities. In Marx, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Habermas, Foucault, Honneth identifies always the same paradox: despite their avowed goals, these theories of society deprive themselves of the very resources that are necessary for critique by succumbing to the temptation of systemic analysis.

A critical theory of society that is coherent and faithful to the seminal definitions given by the two former directors of the Frankfurt Institute, starts from the assumption that social reality contains prescientific forms of praxis from which theory and critique arise. That is to say, the normativity to which critique explicitly or implicitly refers is in the end to be found in the social itself. As a consequence (critical) theory should presuppose that social agents can somehow refer to those criteria, notably when they engage in struggles against domination. This double assumption forms the content of the concept of ‘innerworldly’ or ‘immanent transcendence’, which is at the heart of Critical Injustice, Violence and Social Struggle.
Theory. If critical theory defines itself in relation to forms of social discontent driven by an interest in emancipation, then it is forced to take both an action-theoretic and a normative stance. As soon as subjects are considered as mere material moulded passively by systemic processes of social and/or material reproduction, as soon as social action is understood as a quasi-automatic response to systemic demands, the gap that opens up between social reality and critical analysis becomes unbridgeable. The simple possibility of social struggles, which it is the task of critical theory to explain and justify, becomes conceptually unfathomable.

This emphasis on agency explains the ‘moral’ nature of social normativity. The demands for recognition and the claims of injustice, which drive both individual formation and social evolution, are specifically moral because they relate to the conditions of identity and autonomy. Far from being a move away from critique and emancipatory politics, the insistence on the moral dimension of social struggles places the focus, both theoretical and practical, on the normative meaningfulness of experiences of injustice, and the capacity for resistance of the dominated. For Honneth, it is the best approach to empower individuals and movements socially and politically. The many critics of the recognition paradigm who interpret Honneth’s model as indicating a shift from class struggle and distributive justice to concerns about identity and culture have simply not paid enough attention to what he actually writes. No content of social claim is a priori excluded from demands of recognition. Honneth’s point is simply that, even in the case of material interest, individuals engage in struggles because they want to recover basic social conditions that are essential to them as human beings.

II. The Experience of Injustice: Critical Radicality

The centrality of the ‘moral’ in Honneth plays a certain part in the rejection of his model by writers of Marxist and Nietzschean credence. However, Honneth insists on this term primarily for critical reasons. In this section, I want to highlight the radicality that is implicit in the notion of a moral dimension of social struggles.
**Methodological Radicality**

The exclusive focus on an action-theoretic approach gives Honneth’s social philosophy its distinctive originality. But the way in which Honneth develops this action-theoretic emphasis is just as important.

Action-theoretic approaches to the social have to solve the problem of the access to subjective meaning, the problem of interpretation. Honneth could not hark back to a Weberian type of approach with its decidedly individualistic focus. But neither could he use a phenomenological approach as the one developed by Alfred Schulz. Instead of an ‘interpretive’ approach, Honneth uses a dialectical one, a methodological ‘negativism’ inspired by Michael Theunissen. It is based on the idea that truth cannot be accessed directly but only indirectly.\(^\text{17}\)

Applied to social theory, methodological negativism states that we can gain a preliminary entry into the normative order of society only negatively. Honneth does not describe the normative conditions of individual autonomy and self-realisation in directly positive terms, nor does he attempt to devise hermeneutic tools to question the normative meaning of action in the consciousness of the actors themselves. The first step towards the normative framework is taken by reading it as the reverse image that emerges by contrast, when individual and social pathologies indicate in the negative what that order should contain. The normative order appears as the absent or damaged structures to which suffering social subjects appeal in their protest against social injuries, or even more primarily in their intimate experiences of social domination.

Honneth’s model arises from the history of social struggles and a phenomenology of social suffering. Of special importance in the construction of his model are the seminal historical studies by E.P. Thompson and Barrington Moore, and the sociology of social domination, with the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Sennett as central references.\(^\text{18}\) This first ‘negative’ step does not make the further theoretical elaboration redundant, the one that proposes developmental and historical accounts of the intersubjective constitution of personal identity in its three fundamental dimensions. This theoretical construct, by stressing the essential intersubjective vulnerability of social subjects, gives a retrospective theoretical confirmation of the real
experiences of social suffering. There is therefore a dialectical relationship between the field of experience, which gives access to the theoretical realm, and the field of theory which gives substance to the primordial access granted by the initial phenomenological and sociological approach. This dialectical relationship between experience and theory works both at the general level of theory construction and at the empirical level of analysis of a particular society.

The main reason why Honneth chooses such a negativistic path is not so much methodological, a question of conceptual or epistemological sophistication, as it is ‘critical’. Honneth is so convinced that Critical Theory can achieve its goal only if it takes seriously the imperative of grounding its claims within the immanence of social action, that he makes the experience of social suffering, the ‘consciousness of injustice’ (Barrington Moore), not just the object of theory, but more fundamentally its epistemic guideline.19

Like no other social theory, Honneth’s paradigm of recognition relies on the assumption that theory is dependent, not simply on a level of moral concern, but on the very level of theoretical construction, down to its very language, on the experience it takes as its object. This is true firstly for the choice of the term ‘recognition’ itself, which is simply extracted from the discourses of real social struggles and made into a theoretical category.20 The social theorist learns about the normative structure of society from the historical experiences of struggle, and when struggle is not even possible because domination is too powerful, from the experiences of suffering. In this model, consistent social theory does not interpret social reality from outside or from above. Critical Theory is inconsistent when it relies on the assumption, or leads to the result, that the victims of injustice do not themselves know, somehow, about the normativity that makes their situation unbearable and that renders critique necessary, the very normativity that sustains their feelings of dispossession, their eventual resistance, and possibly their revolts. Critical Theory must find in the very experiences of the dominated, even in their expressive silences, the resources and the language to articulate the normative framework of society to which they implicitly already referred themselves. The critical theorist speaks for the dominated: for them, not, as in systemic theories, in their place, but on their behalf. The self-reflective critical theorist is a mediating spokesperson.21
The approach is methodologically original in a more specific sense. If the normative must be read off negatively from experiences of socially inflicted suffering, no such experience can be a priori discarded. Even, and especially, that kind of social suffering is normatively, and therefore, epistemically, significant, that cannot find clear and adequate expression, either because the force of domination is strong enough to bar it from the public arena, or because it affects subjects so deeply that only psychosomatic pathologies give a negative sign of its noxious effects.

The Theoretical Counterpart of ‘The Tradition of the Oppressed’

This focus on the experience of the oppressed pursues a long tradition of critical thinking, one that has been constantly repressed by the more grandiose attempts to analyse modern society in systemic terms. Yet this strand has always been kept alive, precisely because it holds fast to the simple notion that a theory of social emancipation cannot consistently disregard the very individuals it purports to speak for. This sub-current brings together the most diverse authors who, despite their important divergences, share the concern that inspires Honneth’s methodological negativism. The ‘tradition of the oppressed’, the ‘wretched of the earth’ have not just moral primacy: they define a perspective that has foremost epistemic and methodological primacy. The truth of the social is not to be found in the consciousness of those who dominate, but in the experience of the dominated.

This idea finds a most famous illustration in Marx himself, with the opposition between ideology and proletarian consciousness. The proletariat and the capitalist suffer the same type of alienation, but because their experiences of alienation and of social reality are radically opposed, their epistemic positions themselves are also incommensurable. The bourgeois who profits from the alienating tendencies of his world is for that very reason unable to see its structural contradictions. The bourgeois is the first to be fooled by his own ideology. By contrast, those who actually experience social domination are potentially granted a point of view which enables them to see through the ideological veils.

Of course, a common thread between Marx and Honneth can be claimed only if it is characterised in the most formal terms. Honneth has repeatedly criticised the Marxist paradigm.22 He often points to Marx’s productivist model
of action, his instrumentalist conception of rationality, the metaphysical conception of history, and the two deleterious consequences resulting from these premises: the restriction of emancipatory potential to the proletariat, and a functionalist reductionism in the analysis of modern society. Honneth’s own model can be described precisely as the attempt to keep alive the driving intuition of Marx’s thought: the normative and epistemic paradigmaticity of experiences of injustice, without the theoretical and critical liabilities that come with the problematic premises just mentioned.\textsuperscript{23}

Next to the functionalism of the mature economic analyses, Honneth finds another strand in Marx, which he embraces. In the early writings, the expressivist conception of labour retained action-theoretic and intersubjectivistic flavours that led to the acknowledgement of the moral dimension of alienation. This early focus on the moral dimension of social suffering disappears in the economic writings of the maturity, but reappears in a different shape in the historical studies. For instance, in his historical report on the class struggles in France, Marx’s interest is widened and includes, beyond the mere utilitarian interests of the classes in conflict, their class-specific values and expectations, in other words the whole area of class-specific culture and experience.

This focus on class-specific forms of experience and their respective moral and epistemic worth is a fundamental aspect in Honneth.\textsuperscript{24} Following the Marx of historical class struggles, but also Bourdieu, Honneth explicitly opposes the discourses and cultural modes of expression of dominating and dominated individuals and groups. The capacity of dominating groups to articulate moral and legal norms in universal, logically consistent language produces the illusion of a representation of the existing social order from a neutral, interest-free, epistemically and morally relevant, perspective. But there is a great suspicion that the capacity to articulate specific moral norms from an apparently neutral perspective is at least as much the result of necessity as it is the product of specific abilities: it is precisely because ruling classes have to justify their social domination that they are made to produce universalistic forms of morality. As Honneth says, they are under “a social constraint of justification.”\textsuperscript{25} However consistent moral justification is, it remains a form of justification, a justification of social domination. Moreover, the rul-
ing classes also rule over the symbolic universe and thus exercise a monopoly over the very means that enable any group or individual to present their experiences in legitimate terms. These two socially determined structures, the lack of justificatory pressure and the inaccessibility of symbolic means enabling a socially acceptable representation of specific experiences combine, with other social and political mechanisms, to bar dominated classes from participating in the public sphere, from having their voices heard and acknowledged as relevant. The normative characterisation of moral discourse *de facto* creates forms of cultural hegemony. Conversely, however, these two structures and the cultural exclusion that results from it are precisely the sources of the moral and epistemic superiority of the individuals and groups suffering from social exclusion: beneath the justificatory discourse of the existing order, their invisible, unheard attempt at expressing suffering and discontent point to the reality of the existing order, and, negatively, to the normative ideal that could drive change. Therefore, as Honneth concludes, it is in the repressed experiences of social suffering that ‘historical progress’ finds its real resource.

Honneth’s constant interest in class-specific forms of experience and their relevance for critical theory are a retrieval and transformation of the Marxist intuition that precisely those who suffer from injustice have a privileged position, in epistemic terms, but of course also in an emancipatory perspective. The fundamental difference is that, with the abandonment of the exclusive focus on the revolutionary character of the proletariat, all forms of social suffering and experiences of injustice become *a priori* relevant.

This proximity between the central inspiration of Marxism and Honneth’s theory of recognition is confirmed by Honneth’s strong engagement with the Marxist scholar who best thematised the epistemic superiority of the dominated, Georg Lukács. Famously, the third part of *History and Class Consciousness* is devoted precisely to the analysis of the truth content of the proletarian standpoint. Of course, there is, as with Marx, no straight continuity between Lukács and Honneth. In Lukács, Honneth sees precisely the fateful influence of a theory of emancipation driven by a philosophy of history which led the first generation of Critical Theory into an impasse. However, Honneth’s study of the early Lukács shows how much he wants to retain the spirit of Lukács’
early romantic anti-capitalism. In it, Honneth finds a precursor to his idea that justice and freedom imply individual self-realisation through successful socialisation. Interestingly for Honneth, Lukács provides such a focus from within the Marxist tradition, where the utilitarianism of the orthodox interpretation usually precludes it. Lukács’ ‘socialromantic’ reading of Marx is precisely the reason why he is able to develop a social-theoretical view that is sensitive to ‘social suffering and individual pain’, a theory in which ‘social suffering can appear as suffering’.

In his important reconstruction of the theoretical projects that founded the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Honneth applies his recurrent critique of ‘functionalist reductionism’ to the authors that formed the ‘inner core’ of the Institute, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse. In opposition to them, Honneth sees another precursor in Walter and Benjamin. Against Adorno’s blindness to class-specific experiences and cultural achievements and his blanket rejection of modern forms of cultural expression, Honneth approvingly finds in Benjamin a writer for whom “the conflict between classes was a continually lived experience, as well as a theoretical premise of every cultural and social analysis.” Benjamin was able to see that “it is the cultural struggle of social classes itself that determines the integrative ability of society.” As a consequence, Benjamin was able to view cultural phenomena not just as the effects of a totalitarian process of reification, but as empowering and expressive elements, as the cultural dimension of social struggle.

As always with Honneth, one should read in the words dedicated to another author an indirect description of his own theses. This is confirmed by another study, where Honneth interprets Benjamin’s messianic conception of history as a theory of recognition. Benjamin sees justice in the duty, repeated for each generation, of giving the ‘tradition of the oppressed’ its right, by wrenching it from the interpretation imposed by the winners. This, Honneth claims, amounts to elevating the invisible subjects of domination to the status of integral partners in communication, that is to say to recognising them at last, beyond a past invisibility that history, as the historical self-assertion of the winners, had fatefuly entrenched.

Other authors in the tradition of social critique could be mentioned, which have been commented upon in positive terms by Honneth, and share with
him the methodological decision to paradigmatically focus on social suffering as the relevant epistemic perspective in social theory: Georges Sorel, Jean-Paul Sartre, or Franz Fanon.

The Moral Justification of Violence

The moral dimension of social struggles does not lead to a weakening of the critical potential of Critical Theory. On the contrary, it implies that primacy be given to the experience of social suffering at the methodological and even epistemic level. Few social theories have dared make this move, even within the critical tradition. This goes even further if we now focus on the agonistic dimension of recognition. If social struggles are more than just the battles between divergent strategic interests, or the symptoms of systemic failures, if in fact they are waged on the basis of unmet demands for recognition which, because they try to defend, vindicate or redress the very identity and autonomy of endangered subjects, are fundamentally moral, then struggles themselves have a moral dimension, that is to say they are themselves normatively significant. This new aspect is also easily overlooked and its radicality ignored. Honneth’s social philosophy provides not just an explanation, a descriptive framework, but more importantly a normative justification of social struggles. The normativity of social struggles has two dimensions. First, struggle is normatively justified as the engine of evolution, both at the level of the species and for individuals. Social movements have been responsible for the emergence and entrenchment of differentiated types of rights, from political, to social, to cultural rights. The previous comparison with Marx receives a new confirmation: with the abandonment of the proletariat as the class of emancipation, Honneth rewrites Marx’s famous thesis that history is the history of class struggles. Modern history is the history of social struggles. The critical potential of this justification of social struggle becomes all the more obvious, and in fact all the more radical, if the focus shifts from the teleological normative justification of social struggles as factors of evolution, to their dynamic aspects, the conditions of their emergence, the logic of their development and their own internal structure.

According to the theory of recognition, subjects engage in struggles for recognition when features of their identity that are essential for their full autonomy have not been recognised: since an identity feature can only be established
intersubjectively, the lack of recognition leads directly to the damage or nega-
tion of the feature itself. The consequence of this claim and its critical radical-
city are inevitable and rarely noticed: if subjects and groups build their identity and achieve their autonomy only through struggles for recognition, this means that there is a moral justification of violence. After all violence is what every struggle analytically entails.

‘Violence’ in this context covers the widest range of individual and collective phenomena, from the most passive and individualised forms of resistance, to the most destructive types of action, including the whole spectrum of more or less institutionalised and/or institutionally recognised forms of claim, appeal and resistance. The use of violence as a general notion is warranted, however, because the notion of a struggle for recognition indicates precisely that something that is normatively owed the subjects could not be acquired by them from within the existing order. Recognition entails the breaking of the existing order because that order fails subjects or groups in fundamental ways.

It is not sufficient to reduce the active side of struggles for recognition to acceptable, institutionally legitimate forms of resistance and claims. This misses the point about the necessarily antagonistic aspect of recognition. As soon as a claim is institutionalised, it has by definition passed successfully the threshold of recognition. On the contrary, struggles for recognition are precisely struggles that aim to institutionalise claims that were not yet seen as legitimate. In this sense they are ‘violent’, as doing violence to, as not respecting, as attempting to disrupt and change, an existing order of reality.

The retrospective historical gaze can be misleading. In the case of the historical examples of the acquisition of political and social rights, it has taken generations, an infinite mass of courage, sacrifice and suffering, to impose personal rights, citizenship rights, and later on, social rights. If today a struggle for recognition appeals to those rights, it does not mean that it is no longer violent because it appeals to already institutionalised rights: if it is an authentic struggle for recognition, its specific ‘violence’ consists in the fact that some individuals or groups that so far appeared as not legitimately protected by those rights now claim precisely that the opposite is the case, that they do
fall under their jurisdiction. In the Australian context, the granting of citizenship rights to Aboriginals in 1967, or the recognition of their previous ownership of the land are typical examples of the vindicating of old rights for as yet unrecognised bearers of those rights. If violence is taken in this general sense of a disruption of the existing order, then it is accurate to say that for Honneth, as for Marx and Engels, *mutatis mutandis*, violence is ‘the instrument thanks to which the social movement vanquishes’.

The examples so far point to acceptable forms of violence, a violence that is not really violent, a violence that disrupts only institutional realities. But the logic of struggle for recognition does not *a priori* exclude forms of violence directed against property or even against persons.

In *Unsichtbarkeit*, Honneth attempts an analysis of the moral epistemology of recognition by taking as its point of departure the book by Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. He refers to the passage in the prologue where the “narrator tells how he has always tried to defend himself against his own invisibility by ‘beating around’ with his own fists.” Honneth interprets the crude description of physical violence in the following way: “what in the text is described as a ‘beating around with one’s own fists’ must be taken in a metaphorical sense and must in all probability designate all those practical attempts with which a subject attempts to draw attention to himself.” Honneth clearly metaphorises, or at least euphemises, the text and his own theory when he transforms ‘beating around’ into ‘practical attempts’. This becomes obvious if we ask what sort of ‘praxis’ is meant here. It is the praxis of a subject that *provoke* a reaction in others simply in order to be acknowledged by them. As the book makes clear, provocation here indicates the whole array of ‘existence-ascertaining attitudes’, including the very physical provocation of beating someone up, or even threatening to ‘slit their throat’, to violently force them to finally *see* you.

Already in *Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth had encountered the phenomenon of personal aggression as part of the developmental logic of recognition, with a discussion of the passage in the 1805 Jena lectures where Hegel discusses crime as originating in the law itself. In this text, Hegel shows that an abstract legal recognition also entails misrecognition of other essential features of the individuals, such that the law itself, because of its abstraction, is
responsible for crime. Here again, the text of reference is graphic: “I commit crime, acts of violence, robbery, theft, insult, etc.”

The vague phrase of a moral justification of violence obviously needs to be further detailed. Justification operates firstly as diagnostic and explanation: crime is not only the sign of failures in socialisation, of individual psychological disorders, it can be the symptom of unmet demands for recognition, of pathological tendencies originating in the social order itself. The claims of recognition might therefore be justified even when the means used to express or fulfill them are not. The theory of recognition shows that social violence can have its origin in a violence done to society.

Further than that, no recognition can be achieved without struggle, which in turn necessarily implies some ‘violence’ done, at least to the cultural framework, the laws, or some institutional arrangements of a given society. How does the theory of recognition decide between the normative necessity of some ‘violence’ and the recognition of other people’s rights, including the rights of those who deny recognition? Are there cases where, say, damage to private property would be justified as a means towards a justified end of recognition? This does not seem a priori impossible to accept. Hegel’s justification of the ‘right of necessity’ is a justification of violence done to the law and private property in the name of a higher principle. Are there cases where attacks against individuals, ‘insult’, ‘robbery’, or even ‘crime’ could be justified as justified means for a justified end of recognition? However uncomfortable this question, it is one that the theory of recognition cannot avoid asking itself. The tradition in which Honneth’s work is located has historically always answered in the clearest way: yes, in the case of the gravest denials of recognition, extreme physical violence, including murder was justified. Beside Marx and Engels, one can think of the Benjamin of the “Critique of Violence” and other later texts, or the first chapter of Fanon’s, The Wretched of the Earth.

III. The Critical Edge Blunted

Against systemic reductionisms, the theory of recognition empowers individuals and groups fighting against all forms of domination since it shows how the normative resources that are necessary for critique and the practi-
cal attempts at emancipation are to be found nowhere but in the very experience of those who suffer from, and more or less implicitly reject, the existing order. Despite this promising renewal of critical theory, however, Honneth fails to answer crucial questions which arise directly from his model. In this third section, a series of immanent critical points is made: they arise from the disappointment that occurs when the promises that seem to be contained in Honneth’s initial proposal are left unfulfilled.

An Unacknowledged Logic of Social Movements

As the sub-title of Struggle for Recognition attests, Honneth explicitly presents his theory as a theory of ‘social conflicts’. However, if he does provide a seductive account of the moral dimension behind social suffering and thereby an account of the moral dimension that triggers and fuels social movements, he offers no further distinction and analysis of the specific ‘dynamic’, ‘practical’ and normative logics driving them. Chapter Nine of Struggle for Recognition, which claims that the theory of recognition is relevant for sociological approaches to conflict remains desperately short of important conceptual distinctions. In particular, it does not address, nor does any later text, the crucial problem of the justification of recognition claims, and the distinction, highlighted above, between justified claims, justified ends and justified means. Honneth has only ventured so far as to show how the three spheres of recognition can lead to conflicting demands that require case-sensitive deliberations in individual, moral situations, but this doesn’t address the dilemma of justified claims using illegitimate means.

The different dynamic and normative dimensions of social movements have been well identified and substantially developed in the work of Emmanuel Renault. In his latest book, in particular, Renault convincingly proves that the account provided by Honneth of the ‘moral dimension’ of social suffering and social conflicts creates the conditions of possibility for a theoretical model of the different dimensions of the emergence and development of social movements. What are the conditions that are structurally necessary for individual experiences of social suffering to be harnessed so that they can give rise to collective action? What subjective and collective processes are at play when violations of the intimate sphere lead to organised resistance and action? In other words, how does social suffering become politically relevant? It is
the role of the philosopher, and not just of the empirical sociologist, to make
these conceptual distinctions and study these processes, since the develop-
mental logic of social movements is supported by a normativity that is con-
ceptually justified and reconstructed.

An Undeveloped Critical Analysis of Institutions

This lack of further development is especially obvious if we consider the hori-
zon that the theory of recognition opens for alternative critical analyses of
‘systemic’ phenomena, those social, economic, and political institutions that
seem best explained as the results of endogenous systemic logics. The the-
ory of recognition seems to be particularly weak when compared with the
sweeping descriptions and critiques that systemic theories of modern institu-
tions are able to make. In fact, however, Renault proves that the theory of
recognition is able, not just to give a theory of social movements, but grants
also a coherent and innovative perspective on such institutional, ‘systemic’
realities as the legal sphere, the labour and the commodity markets. 40

As Renault remarks, it is striking that Honneth’s interpretation of recogni-
tion leaves out of consideration the important interaction between subjects
and institutions. One of the most important lessons of Hegel’s theory of
Sittlichkeit is precisely that individual autonomy depends on institutional real-
ities for its concrete realisation. Despite his rereading of the Philosophy of Right
as a critical diagnostic of modern social pathologies, 41 Honneth has never
widened the scope of intersubjectivity to include institutional recognition.
This probably explains why he has failed so far to develop a more substan-
tial critique of modern institutions as an obvious consequence of his own
model.

If institutional arrangements, as the results of compromises between groups
in conflict, are embedded in normative frameworks, then the theory of recog-
nition provides a key, not just for the diagnostic of existing pathologies, nor
is it just restricted to explaining the different struggles for recognition that
erupt as a result of asymmetrical distributions of power, more profoundly,
the theory of recognition might also provide a key to the analysis of the func-
tioning of institutions itself. Of course, this access to institutional realities
through the contested normative assumptions implied in them does not pro-
vide an exhaustive interpretive view. There is no denying the partially autonomous development of subsystems. But the normative, recognitive dimension is a fundamental part of those institutional realities and it is just as mistaken to leave out of consideration their normative embeddedness.

To give just one example, the developments in contemporary capitalism can be explained, to an important extent, through the antagonistic interplay between those classes that own the different modes of value-accumulation and constantly attempt to widen their scope, with those who produce value and suffer directly from changes in the nature of labour. Capitalistic economies could not function if there was not a basic acceptance of some of its fundamental normative assumptions, but, conversely, the factual framework that results from this asymmetrical compromise between social forces, contains numerous conflictual points which need constant justification and renegotiation.42 Too many theories of contemporary capitalism forget that the neoliberal push towards the abolition of the welfare-State and the globalisation of exchanges have been the result of a concerted, organised effort on the part of business groups, backed by an army of ideologues, and put into practice by convinced or interested politicians. There is nothing fateful about them. These efforts have been and continue to be opposed, just as much as they need constant justification.

An Alternative Political Theory Repressed

In no dimension is the blunting of the potentially radical nature of Honneth’s theory more obvious than in its political aspect. The fundamental thesis, inspired by Hegel, that self-determination is only abstract if it is accounted for separate from the conditions of self-realisation leads to an important insight, that, again, is quite innovative in the contemporary landscape, namely that the theory of justice cannot separate strictly the just from the good. Of course, the good cannot be included in a substantial sense. What is required is a ‘formal ethics’, a description in formal terms of those social structures that are always necessary for the self-realisation of subjects. The last chapter in Struggle for Recognition explicitly presented the theory of recognition as an alternative to both liberalism and communitarianism, avoiding the abstraction and individualism of the former, and the normative overburdening of the latter.
The following words, written about the early Lukács, are a good summary of Honneth’s early critical view of liberal definitions of justice: “an ineradicable connection between individual self-realisation and community formation” makes it possible to extend “the idea of progress beyond the concept of social justice and universal freedom.”

Linked with the intuition driving the action-theoretic focus and the methodological negativism, this rejection of political liberalism was highly innovative and far-reaching. The direct consequence is that liberal theories of justice must face the same kind of suspicion as did moral justification: the appeal to highly formal principles of social justice and general freedom, however consistent these might sound, does not provide a conceptual language that can account for social injustice. It fails on its own terms. An adequate theory of justice can only develop negatively, as the negative set of principles appealed to in real experiences of injustice. The normativity within ‘the consciousness of injustice’, which is articulated and harnessed in social struggles, is therefore not just moral or social, it also has concrete political relevance, in that it normatively questions the principles of a community, and, when organised collectively, projects an alternative model of a just society.

In Struggle for Recognition, Honneth was very close to acknowledging this aspect of his theory. He writes in the penultimate chapter: “In the light of norms of the sort constituted by the principle of moral responsibility or the values of society, personal experiences of disrespect can be interpreted and represented as something that can potentially affect other subjects.” The discovery by the subject that his experience has a social character, is in fact symbolic of a group-experience, is the motivational basis for a collective action that relies on this shared experience. Therefore, the initial intimate experience of injustice harbours the potential that is required for real political action. More profoundly, the negativistic methodology leads to the conclusion that there is no access to justice principles except negatively, from the immanence of experiences of injustice in which the abstraction of liberal principles comes to light, and new rights and/or new applications of existing rights are demanded. But Honneth never visited the avenue that his own theory had opened up. Instead, in his last writings, he has been anxious to recast the theory of recognition within classical political liberalism, thus renouncing the original political stance provided by his early Hegelianism, his strong action-theoretic approach and his methodological negativism.
**Acritical Theory of Modernity**

There is a tension in Honneth’s writings, between the darkness of the sociological diagnostics drawing on contemporary sociological research, and the conceptual reconstructions which offer an idealised version of modernity. Many critics of Honneth probably think mainly of the second type of texts and do not realise that they are only the counterpart to highly critical accounts of modernity in its empirical reality.

All critical-theoretical models draw their ultimate inspiration from a fundamental vision of modernity. It is striking that, despite his expert sociological critique of contemporary pathologies, Honneth continues to maintain the Habermasian trust in a general tendency towards ‘moral progress’, a vision of Enlightenment as an unfinished project, where Enlightenment now stands for autonomy through full self-realisation. Honneth never discusses the worst moral failures of modernity, totalitarianism and colonialism. Does the general model of recognition become obsolete if the thesis of a general ‘moral progress’ and ‘social evolution’ is problematised, or even dropped? Does the normativity of recognition collapse if it is no longer supported by a teleological, idealised account of modernity? More specifically, does the cognitive value of law become obsolete if the history of modern rights is problematised and the ambiguous role played by law in the worst evils of modernity is also taken into account?

* Jean-Philippe Deranty, Department of Philosophy, Macquarie University, North Ryde, 2109, Sydney NSW, Australia.

**Notes**

1 Although Habermas seems to think that the recognition paradigm does not represent a shift from his own. See J. Habermas, *The Inclusion Of The Other, Studies in Political Theory*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, p. 208.

2 Hegel of course, but also Rousseau, Fichte, the young Marx, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Gadamer, Lévinas, Taylor, Habermas evidently. Husserl is one major figure that seems to be missing from this list.

3 Habermas famously adopts Mead’s pragmatic, interactionist theory of social action in the second volume of his *Theory Of Communicative Action*, but Honneth was also instrumental, with Hans Joas, in the rediscovery of Mead in German social


6 Besides the critical study of Habermas in the last three chapters of The Critique Of Power, the two central texts, dating from the early 1990s, where Honneth signals his departure from the pragmatic-linguistic interpretation of communication towards a more fully-fledged, anthropological one are: “Die soziale Dynamik von Mißachtung. Zur Ortbestimmung einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie,” in Das Andere Der Gerechtigkeit. Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2000, pp. 88-109; “Moral Consciousness And Class Domination. Some Problems In The Analysis Of Hidden Morality,” in The Fragmented World, pp. 205-209.

7 As Honneth’s early work with Joas suggests, the methodological function of philosophical anthropology seems to be central in Honneth’s model. He seems to want to replace the communicative action grounded in universal pragmatics with an anthropologically grounded theory of intersubjectivity. This avoids the idealisation of social interaction that he perceives in Habermas, with its corollary deficit in critical potential. This is confirmed by the latest text published by Honneth in which the epistemology of social recognition is unlocked through recourse to developmental psychology with strong anthropological undertones. See A. Honneth, Unsichtbarkeit. Stationen Einer Theorie der Intersubjektivität, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2003, pp. 10-27. However, the anthropological foundation of recognition structures is also interpreted historically, so much so that sometimes, in his later texts, Honneth denies the anthropological foundation in favour of the historical one. See A. Honneth, Unsichtbarkeit. Stationen Einer Theorie der Intersubjektivität, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2003, pp. 10-27. Compare with his rejection of the anthropological objection put by Fraser and others, Redistribution Or Recognition?


10 The model is presented in all its details in chapter 5 of Struggle For Recognition and numerous texts thereafter simply refer back to that book.

11 This summary of the logic of recognition in the early Jena Hegel is also a good description of Honneth’s own understanding of it: “Since within the framework of an ethically established relationship of mutual recognition, subjects are always learning something more about their particular identity, and since, in each case, it is a new dimension of their selves that they see confirmed thereby, they must once again leave, by means of conflict, the stage of ethical life they have reached, in order to achieve the recognition of more demanding form of their individuality.” Honneth, Struggle For Recognition, p. 17. This is confirmed at the end of the book, with the application to the sociology of social conflicts, p. 162.

12 This is probably the most fundamental inspiration behind Honneth’s thought. He has never wavered over it.


15 Despite his unmistakable emphasis on the ‘moral’ grammar of social conflicts, Honneth’s model is constantly read as a model of identity politics in an exclusively cultural sense.

16 The typical rhetorical gesture is to write Taylor “and Honneth,” as if the commas, or brackets, were sufficient to justify this alignment. In fact, the political scope and dimensions of Honneth’s ethics of recognition are very different from those of Taylor’s liberal interpretation of the model, as this article attempts to show.


18 Honneth cites two types of historical and sociological studies: seminal works that have established a new perspective in class-studies, that of a ‘moral economy’
(E.P. Thompson) underlying social movements, and contemporary research whose results confirm empirically or in specific areas the fundamental theses presented in those seminal works. The seminal historical work is E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1968. Honneth presents his own model as a theoretical account of Thompson’s notion of ‘moral economy’. Also seminal is Barrington Moore’s *Injustice: The Social Bases Of Obedience And Revolt*, London, Macmillan, 1978. Richard Sennett’s *The Hidden Injuries Of Class*, New York, Knopf 1972, provides the seminal reference in the sociological literature. The amount of contemporary historical and sociological work used by Honneth to substantiate the theory of recognition is tremendous. Any serious critique of Honneth has to face the task of matching him in the use and knowledge of historical and sociological literature.

19 The article “Moral consciousness and Class Domination” is the most explicit text in this respect.


21 This important implication of the recognition-paradigm for the position of theory in relationship with its object has been most clearly underlined by Emmanuel Renault in his article “La philosophie critique: porte-parole de la souffrance sociale,” in *Mouvements*, no. 34, 2002.

22 See especially chapter 7 of *Struggle For Recognition*.

23 This is most explicitly affirmed in “Domination And Moral Struggle: The Philosophical Heritage Of Marxism Revisited” in Honneth, *The Fragmented World*, pp. 3-14.

24 The texts where this dimension of his thought appears most clearly are: “Moral Consciousness and Class Domination,” but also the first chapter of his first reply to Nancy Fraser in *Redistribution Or Recognition?*


26 Honneth, “A Fragmented World: On The Implicit Relevance Of Lukács’ Early Work” in *The Fragmented World*, pp. 50-60. It is worth noting that in the German
edition, the article is in first position and clearly gives the whole book its title, suggesting that, even more than a retrieval of Marx, Honneth’s is the attempt to fulfil the ‘implicit’ potential in Lukács.

27 This is in fact the driving concern behind Honneth’s constructs: that theory should never be severed from the real social experience, from the depth and multi-dimensionality of social suffering as social.

28 Honneth, “Critical Theory,” see above.

29 Ibid., p. 82.


31 Honneth, Struggle For Recognition, chapter 7.

32 Ibid. See also Unsichtbarkeit, pp. 71-105.


35 Ibid.


37 See Elements of the Philosophy of Right, § 127.


40 Renault, L’expérience de l’injustice, Chapter 3: “The institutions of injustice.”


42 In Fraser and Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition?, pp. 254-256. Honneth himself suggests this, but the passing suggestion is not further developed. His latest book confirms that he does not want his theory to take this path.

Honneth, *Struggle For Recognition*, p. 162. The point is repeated p. 164.

This shift from an Hegelian alternative in the texts around *Struggle For Recognition*, towards a more orthodox liberal position is explicitly made in *Redistribution or Recognition?* See pp. 177-179. In *Unsichtbarkeit*, the Hegelian inspiration seems to be reneged upon (see the Preface, p. 7), and the important first text of the book, the eponymous “Unsichtbarkeit,” strikingly interprets recognition in Kantian terms.


Again, the later *Redistribution or Recognition* texts are strikingly less critical of modernity than the earlier texts. See for instance, pp. 182-183.

This ideal account of modernity is needed, according to Honneth, in order to anchor and thus justify the normative claims found in recognition. See *Struggle for Recognition*, chapter 9.